Since the Seventh-day Adventist Church was founded at the first General Conference Session in May 1863, only a few things have remained the same about the organization. One is the office of General Conference Secretary, which is as old as the General Conference itself. The constitution adopted on May 21, 1863, provided that the General Conference’s “officers . . . shall be a President, Secretary, Treasurer, and an Executive Committee of three, of whom the President shall be one” (Review and Herald 1863:204, 205). Today the Executive Committee has increased a hundred-fold to more than 300, but the Secretary continues to be one of the three chief officers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Of course, the role of the General Conference (GC) Secretary has changed. This article briefly sketches out the history of the GC Secretariat, arguing that in its first four decades it was chiefly a conduit for the collection of communication of information, before becoming what might be termed “mission control”: the world church’s center for mission planning and missionary support. But then in a third phase it became more focused on supporting the burgeoning denominational bureaucracy. Most recently, a fourth phase seems to have been entered, though it is still in its formative stages, with Secretariat and its associated denominational entities at world headquarters shifting to a renewed focus on strategically planning for outreach to unreached people groups and on supporting and developing cross-cultural mission and missionaries. The paper concludes by arguing that this mission focus is what the Seventh-day Adventist Church needs in the twenty-first century if it is to make a real impact on territories such as the 10/40 Window and large cities, where, in its 150 years, it has previously had minimal influence. The world church needs the GC Secretariat once again to become Adventist “mission control.”
First Phase: 1863–1901

In 1863, when the denomination was founded, there were just six conferences, with 30 employees and only around 125 local churches and 3,500 members; there was not much for administrators to administer. Further, for the denomination’s first 25 years, with Adventists limited both geographically and numerically, GC Sessions were held annually and so the three officers and the Executive Committee were less important—most decisions were discussed and taken by the session rather than by committees. It is not entirely clear what the officers did in those early years. The constitution briefly defined the Treasurer’s function, but about the other two officers it stated simply: “The duties of the President and Secretary shall be such respectively as usually pertains to those offices” (Review and Herald 1863:204, 205).

What this seems to have meant in practice was that the Secretary took the minutes at the annual Sessions. In addition, following an action taken by the fourth GC Session in 1866 that thenceforth every conference should submit statistical reports to the Secretary, he thereafter presented a statistical report to each annual session. But these seem to have been the sum of the Secretary’s duties for the first twenty years of the organized Seventh-day Adventist Church.

As the church grew, however, administration became more important. So, too, did the mundane task of taking official minutes, since sessions lasted longer and voted more, and more substantive and consequential actions. Every major decision taken by GC Sessions or the Executive Committee was summarized and recorded by the Secretary. These included rulings on church organization, missionary strategy and placement, creation of new church entities, and decisions on policy, doctrine, financial matters, and the denominational stance on political and governmental matters.

By 1883, the number of congregations, church members, and employees had all quadrupled or more in the twenty years since 1863. There were 32 conferences, and the Central European, British and Scandinavian Missions (Yearbook 1884:73). More and more decisions were being deferred by the annual sessions to the General Conference Committee (as the Executive Committee was typically called). At the 1883 GC Session, complaints were voiced that “more thorough work [could] be accomplished in the various branches of our cause by faithful correspondence on the part of secretaries.” This seems to have been directed at the General Conference Secretary, for the session did not reelect the Secretary, A. B. Oyen, and instead returned to office the veteran Uriah Smith (who had previously served 17 terms in three separate spells as Secretary: 1863–1873, 1874–1876, 1877–1881). It also amended the constitution to add a fourth officer: a Corresponding Secretary...
(who seems, though, to have worked under the direction of the Secretary). Membership of the General Conference Committee was also increased for the first time, from three to five (see session minutes, *Yearbook* 1884:38–39).

The role of the Secretary’s office had evidently evolved and grown. It now revolved around maintaining correspondence with the conference and mission secretaries, sharing with them the decisions taken by sessions and by executive committee meetings (themselves given official form by the Secretary), and trying to ensure that these decisions were being honored and implemented by the burgeoning denomination.

In 1886, the General Conference Committee was increased to seven and, for the first time, the Secretary was elected a member (*Yearbook* 1887:32, 41). Thereafter he invariably was a member of the Executive Committee, though the Treasurer, as yet, was not. A year later, however, illustrative of the fact that the Secretary as yet had no special responsibility for mission, the GC constitution was amended to increase the number of officers from four to seven, with the addition of “a Home Mission Secretary, a Foreign Mission Secretary, and an Educational Secretary” (*Yearbook* 1888:37, 91).

By 1889, of 33 conferences, six were in Europe and the South Pacific, with missions in Britain and South Africa (*Yearbook* 1890:59). Important decisions were taken at the 1889 session, though only after considerable debate: to hold future GC Sessions on a biennial instead of annual basis; to increase both the responsibilities of the Executive Committee and its membership (from seven to nine); and to establish a Foreign Mission Board (*General Conference Daily Bulletin* 1889:1, 45, 59, 139).

For the next fourteen years, it was with the Mission Board, as it was often called, that responsibility lay for administering the foreign mission program. It initially had a positive impact, and in the early 1890s the number of foreign missionaries sent out from America increased significantly (Bauer 1982:104–140; Neufeld et al. 1996:2:97; fig. 1). One organizational consequence of the role of the Mission Board was that in 1897 the constitutional office of Foreign Mission Secretary was abolished; and while the term continued to be used for the next six years, it referred to the secretary of the Mission Board (see General Conference Bulletin 1897–1898:67, 129; *General Conference Daily Bulletin* 1899:102) The GC Secretary’s role also increased, however, and he was given his own office in the Review and Herald press building, which also functioned as GC headquarters (White 1977:3). The Secretary’s job had become a full-time one, keeping abreast of developments around the world, keeping minutes of GC Executive Committee meetings, and informing the world church of its decisions as well as those of sessions.

For the period 1863–1901, almost the first forty years of the church’s life, the GC Secretary’s role was essentially one of recording, collating, and
presenting information, and communicating it to conference and mission leaders. It was not yet an executive role and neither was it especially closely identified with mission, although the Secretary’s office was responsible for communicating with missionaries around the world.

**Second Phase: 1901–c.1970**

In 1901, an extraordinary, even radical, restructuring of the church’s organization took place at the urging of Ellen White, who had recently returned from nine years’ mission service in Australia and recognized that the system of organization that had worked for a sect limited to the northeast and Midwest of the United States did not work well for a church that now had a foothold in all the world’s inhabited continents and had designs to reach the world (Oliver 1989). Although we often forget the fact, the reorganization was not completed in 1901—the final steps were taken in 1903, including the subordination of the Mission Board to the Executive Committee, and the election of a new Secretary, William A. Spicer, who totally reinvented the role of Secretary. A confidant of the president elected in 1901, Arthur G. Daniells, both were visionaries of global mission. Spicer and Daniells were officers of the General Conference together until 1926. Acting as a team, together with the treasurer and the Executive Committee, which became the Church’s foreign mission board, Daniells and Spicer henceforth planned strategically for mission advances in an unprecedented way.2

One could say the Secretary’s duties were lessened, for, with new organizational structures like unions, there was greater devolution of responsibilities for church governance to other levels of denominational authority. However, the Secretary’s responsibilities were actually increased, because, with more sophisticated governing structures, increasing membership, and expanding mission, ultimately there was more for the GC to oversee, and many new duties were assigned to the Secretary’s office. During this era, it took responsibility for recruiting, dispatching, coordinating, and caring for missionaries, as well as for publicizing and promoting foreign mission among church members in the denomination’s original North American heartland and its new European and Australian heartlands. The end result was the creation of the GC Secretariat, though during the Daniells and Spicer years the term seems to have been used collectively for the leaders of departments (then titled secretaries, rather than directors), rather than for the staff of the General Conference Secretary (Spalding 1949:491; Neufeld et al. 1996:1:460, 461). At the 1936 GC Session, the Secretary, Milton Kern (1936:59) used “Secretariat” in his report as a collective term for his department—probably the first time it was used in this way. Certainly, however, regardless of
nomenclature, both the number and responsibilities of the Secretary’s staff had significantly expanded in the early 1900s.

In 1905, two new positions, subordinate to the Secretary, were created: those of Home Secretary and Statistical Secretary.\(^3\) The Statistical Secretary started publishing the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* in 1904 and the standalone *Annual Statistical Report* in 1907. This was important, for, as the Secretariat accumulated more data, it took over the role of planning—deliberately and purposefully—for expanding mission. The 1913 GC Session created a new position, that of General Conference Assistant Secretary (*Yearbook* 1913:5).\(^4\) The 1918 Session created the post of Associate Secretary who, unlike the Assistant and Statistical Secretaries, was one of the officers of the GC (*Yearbook* 1919:5, 264). Eight years later, the 1926 Session amended the Constitution again to provide for multiple (initially two) Associate Secretaries (*Yearbook* 1927:321).

The Secretary’s staff played a role in administering denominational organization, to be sure, but the increase in staff was largely a result of the need to administer the fast-growing foreign mission program. The impact of the new emphasis on worldwide mission and of the new role of the GC Secretary and the Secretariat can be seen in figure 1. Up to 1889 there had been few missionaries sent out, but in the early 1890s there was a spike in the number before it declined as a result of the administrative sclerosis and financial problems in the mid to late 1890s that necessitated the 1901 reorganization. The number then increased steadily until World War I, then spiked again in 1920, before remaining buoyant for a decade until the coming of the Great Depression. In the first thirty years of our foreign mission program, from 1874 through 1903, 788 “mission appointees,” as they were then called, were sent out; in the next twenty years, through the end of 1923, the number was 2,257.\(^5\)

![Figure 1. Mission appointees and IDEs, 1874–2014](image-url)
The Great Depression inevitably led to some retrenchment and a decline in the numbers of missionaries sent out, but less than might have been, because church leaders during the Depression, including C. K. Meyers, one of the forgotten GC Secretaries, and his successor, M. E. Kern, spared the foreign mission program from cuts, as much as possible. In 1930–31, the denominational workforce in North America was cut by 10% but in the mission fields the workforce decreased less than 5%, though salaries were cut. There were 628 new mission appointments from 1930 to 1935, and though this was fewer, in six years, than the 714 appointed in the preceding four years, it was, as Kern pointed out to the 1936 GC Session, still a sizeable number given that, in his words, “we have been passing through most serious times, with cut budgets and depleted working forces”; moreover, as he also observed, “not one mission station has been abandoned during these hard years” (Kern 1936:59–60).

The Second World War had a major negative impact, but as soon as the war was over, there was a huge increase in the number of mission appointees sent out, thanks in large part to the men who served from 1936 to 1950 as General Conference President and Secretary: respectively J. L. McElhany and E. D. Dick. With extraordinary boldness, vision, and faith, in the war years they planned, set aside funds, and arranged for training of missionary families, against the day that peace returned (Trim forthcoming). Within twelve months of the end of the war, large numbers of missionaries began arriving in the Middle East and returning to China, albeit the latter returned sooner than expected because of the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War (Trim 2010:28, 45; Trim 2015:10, 11). In the 1950s and 1960s, the Secretariat continued to be responsible for the church’s foreign mission program, while the Secretary played an ever more important role as one of the three premier GC officers.

**Third Phase: c.1970–2010**

From the 1970s, however, perhaps even the late 1960s, the role of Secretariat has evolved yet further. In the church’s first forty years the GC Secretary’s role had been one of collating and corresponding; in the next seventy-odd years, it was one of joint chief planner for mission expansion and chief executive of the foreign mission program. But in the last 45 years, it has, I suggest, become one of chief bureaucrat and guardian of Policy.

This partly was a result of the expansion, in every sense, of the denomination. By 1970, 107 years after the General Conference was founded, it had 75 member unions, comprising 379 conferences and missions, employing a workforce of over 26,000, with more than 2 million members of 16,505 local churches. It was inevitable that administration would grow
in size and complexity as well. In 1973, GC President Robert Pierson and Secretary Clyde Franz created the first permanent committees with significant authority delegated from the Executive Committee: the President’s Administrative Council, or PRADCO; the President’s Executive Advisory, or PREXAD; and the GC Administrative Committee, or ADCOM. Ten years later, PRADCO and ADCOM were merged. Meanwhile, the number of standing and ad hoc committees at the world headquarters multiplied.

Nobody loves bureaucracy, but the truth is, administration is necessary. Secretariat provided the indispensable administration of the expanding committee system; and the leader of the burgeoning GC bureaucracy was the Secretary. Increasingly, too, many division and union secretaries had snowballing administrative loads and needed assistance and advice. The GC Secretariat had played a key role in the preparation and publication of a Working Policy in 1926 when it was 63 pages long. But the Working Policy became ever larger, and divisions adopted their own localized versions.

At the GC Session of 1975 the position of Undersecretary was created. Duties specific to the Undersecretary were serving as the agenda secretary for the GC Session, Annual Council, Spring Meeting, and officers’ meetings; responsibility for the GC Working Policy; and providing oversight to administrative and personnel matters within the office of the Secretariat. The creation of this new officer position and its assigned responsibilities speaks volumes about the trajectory of the Secretariat in the 1970s. Yet policy-related duties could not be restricted to the Undersecretary. Increasingly, the Associate Secretaries spent more and more time advising and training their counterparts at other levels of church structure, helping them to ensure they were in accordance with world church policies and practices, and assisting them to improve the professionalism and effectiveness of division and union Secretariats.

All these are worthy and valuable contributions to the global Seventh-day Adventist Church. But somewhere along the way, something had to give—and it was what for seventy years had been the most important function of the GC Secretary and Secretariat: foreign mission as it had been called, or global mission as it became known in 1990, when, tellingly, it was placed under Presidential. Distracted by heavy administrative responsibilities, Secretariat was not able to stop the world church’s mission program experiencing mission drift. The record number of foreign missionaries (or interdivisional employees [IDEs], as they had become known) recruited and dispatched in a single year was 473, in 1969; in 1970 the number was 470. But in the forty-five years since then—the period in which Secretariat’s focus gradually shifted—the number of IDEs sent to serve has steadily decreased—only once (1986) did the number for one year exceed 400; and in five of the last eleven years the annual total was in
double, rather than triple digits (Trim 2012: fig. 1). And while this decline is partly due to changes in the wider missional environment within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it is also a symptom of a larger problem.

This becomes especially clear if we look not at the annual totals of missionaries, but at the numbers of missionaries deployed in relationship to total membership. Figure 2 shows the same 140 years of data on missionaries sent out for service but calculated as the number of missionaries per 10,000 church members. Because there can be quite volatile annual fluctuations, it is helpful to look at the trend using ten-year moving averages (figure 3). We see even more clearly the sharp rise in the early 1890s and the drop-off in the years leading up the epochal 1901 Session; the steady
growth and stability from 1903 through 1930; and the sharp decline during the Depression and World War II. In terms of the resources available to the world church, the 25 years from the end of the war do not appear as remarkable, but the decline since the late 1960s is even more marked. Our mission effort relative to world church membership is but a fraction of what it was half a century ago.

By the early twenty-first century, Seventh-day Adventist mission was “on autopilot,” as the world church’s current Executive Secretary put it five years ago (Ng 2010). Now, nobody took a conscious decision that Secretariat should downplay the world church’s mission program; nor did anyone deliberately decide to shift the focus away from entering new territories and reaching unreached people groups. Rather, both happened gradually. One reason was that the growing strength of the church in what once had been mission fields meant that the nature of global mission changed. But “as the church grew, mission appeared to lose its intentionality and attention. Today mission appears to be running by default, without a strategic focus” (Ng 2010:203). The world church adopted patterns of planning for and resourcing worldwide mission that reflected the mission needs of the early and mid-twentieth century, rather than of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. And, without anyone realizing it, those patterns became ruts that the church just followed, repeating what had been done before without thinking about whether honoring our original goals meant doing something different.

The church kept doing the same thing because it brought extraordinary success in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, the islands of the South Pacific, and Southeast Asia. But as a result Adventists lost sight of the fact that across most of the 10/40 Window and much of Western and Central Europe, there were many unreached or under-reached people groups, especially (though not only) in large cities—and these are also challenges to the church in regions with large concentrations of church members, such as North America, Australasia and Latin America. Globally, the church shifted from an emphasis on “pioneer mission to mission of least resistance” (Ng 2010:221).

The Present—and the Future

In the last quinquennium at world headquarters things have started to change. By 2010 it had become plain that more collaboration and unity of purpose was needed. And so the General Conference Mission Board was created to exercise oversight of the world church’s mission program. All the GC’s mission-related entities were placed under the Executive Secretary: the Office of Adventist Mission, the Institute of World Mission,
Adventist Volunteer Services, the renamed and reshaped International Personnel Resources and Services, and the renamed Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research. Together with the Associate Secretaries (the Secretariat proper) they formed what is called the GC “Mission Family” of entities, headed by the Secretary. In 2012, the Office of Membership Software was added. Vitally, all these entities work together, utilizing their different areas of expertise collaboratively, intentionally, and very amicably.

Have all the problems been solved? No. Much still remains to be done. But the GC Secretariat has changed course.

What should the role of Secretariat be in the twenty-first century? The administrative duties it has taken on in the last forty years are important, but only at the world headquarters can planning that is truly strategic—planning for mission advances, of the kind that characterized the early twentieth-century Adventist Church—take place. And at the world headquarters there is an unparalleled concentration of mission expertise in the “Mission Family” because of its entities’ enduring responsibilities for recruiting, training, sending, sustaining, supporting, and returning international service employees, for planning and resourcing global church planting, and for promoting mission around the world. The GC Secretariat is the logical location for “mission control,” as it was for much of our history. And mission needs to be the Secretariat’s top priority—as it was for much of Adventist history.

If the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to make significant advances in North Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe, then it needs to recapture the boldness and vision shown by church leaders in the distant past. It must break out of the ruts it corporately fell into in the late twentieth century. The world church would do well to give further consideration to how resources are distributed worldwide. It urgently needs to establish innovative, less bureaucratic structures and processes for mission and for international, intercultural service, enabling church members who have a passion for mission, as well as those with technical or administrative skills, to be drawn from everywhere, and sent everywhere as they are needed. The GC Secretariat should resume its historic place in shaping and directing the Seventh-day Adventist mission enterprise. Church leaders cannot be content with the progress the church made in the late twentieth century. Adventist mission must never again be set on autopilot.

Notes

This is a development of a report given to the 2015 Annual Council. The author thanks Benjamin Baker and G. T. Ng for their comments on a draft of this paper, and Ashlee Chism for research assistance.
There is no comprehensive study of this process but Bauer (1982) is a key work that explores a number of the issues. For Ellen White’s critical view of the Mission Board see Oliver 1989:133n. For the effective end of the Foreign Mission Board in 1903, see *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, April 14, 1903, p. 195.

The date of the creation of the Statistical Secretary’s position is unclear. The *SDA Encyclopedia* (Neufeld et al. 1996:2:702) states that Harvey Rogers, who had been the statistical clerk from 1901, was only appointed Statistical Secretary in 1905. Furthermore, both his appointment and that of Estella Houser as Home Secretary were voted by the GC Committee on June 5, 1905, which also voted to “release . . . Professor Bland” from the “assistant treasurership” and to call H. A. Morrison to that post (*GC Archives, Record Group 1, “General Conference Committee Proceedings,”* vol. VII, p. 24). However, Rogers, Houser, and W. R. Bland were all listed in the previous year’s *Yearbook*, by the titles voted in 1905, as the “appointed assistants” to the three officers (*Yearbook* 1904:11). The most likely explanation is that the officers made these appointments, which were retrospectively formalized by the Executive Committee.

At the 1909 GC Session the position of Assistant Secretary for Europe was created (*Yearbook* 1909:10) but this was an office in the European Division, the predecessor of division secretary.

These figures are collated from records in the GC Archives, Record Group 21.

Calculated from the 1931 *Annual Statistical Report*.

See Dias and Kuhn 2015 for a discerning analysis of the church’s approach to mission and for a series of important suggestions for overhauling the ways in which cross-cultural missionaries are called and work (some of which develop ideas sketched out by Ng 2010).

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